Enid, Oklahoma

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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AGRICULTURE AS A WAY OF LIFE**

The Protestant Point of View

By Dr. Mark A. Dawber*

I have been requested to present a statement on Agriculture as a Way of Life from the point of view of the Protestant Church. I have been racking my own mind and searching the literature on this subject and, for the life of me, I cannot see anything that in any peculiar sense is Protestant. I may add also that the same would apply to the same subject so far as anything Roman Catholic or Jewish is concerned. As a Protestant I may state my convictions as to the religious values which are inherent in rural life, around which a philosophy can be developed. The point I am seeking to make here is that while there is a deep underlying religious philosophy to rural life and agriculture, it is not the private possession of any one church--Roman Catholic, Jewish or Protestant.

On the front of one of the buildings on the campus of the University of California is the motto: "To rescue for human society the native values of rural life." This is the announced aim of this institution and it has given me a suggestion as a text for this discussion. First, there are certain values that are native to rural life. They cannot be found, nor do I believe they can be fully developed, in the city. Second, these values have significance for all human society, city and rural. No enduring civilization can be achieved without them. Third, as society is now organized and rural life is allowed to deteriorate, society in general is in grave danger of losing these values, without which there is little hope of any satisfactory solution of the program of human life and a satisfactory human society.

Historically there has always existed at least a supposed difference (we may even say opposition) between rural and city life; one Heathen and the other Pagan. The Heathen in the country and the Pagan in the city. The Heathen was the man of the heath and the Pagan the man of the pagan or house, usually in the city. Although it should be said that these words "Heathen" and "Pagan" have very different connotations today. Civilization went down because of the inability of the Pagan cities to withstand the onslaught of the barbarians. The new civilization was founded upon a rural Christianity. The best that remains in our present civilization is based upon a rural culture. It is important that we remember this historical fact. Whenever a civilization has allowed its rural life to deteriorate, that civilization has perished. This is not due to an economic factor but to a cultural factor. One of the best documents setting forth the value of the rural culture is the encyclical written by Pope Leo XIII on labor. It is a re-statement of the Christian philosophy of rural life. I am indebted to this pronouncement for much of my thinking on this subject.

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What then are some of these values inherent in agriculture and rural life which make for such a religious philosophy as we have in mind?

The first is concerned with the religious value of rural life in its native bearing--the farm home and the family. All individual and social progress depends upon the condition of the home and the family. Foreign missionaries tell us that they are severely handicapped in their work until they are able to secure something of the home and family ideal as a basis. The farm home and the farm family have notable elements which have profound significance in a religious culture. The first is unity. The second is loyalty. The peculiar characteristic of farming as a vocation is that it not only requires these elements but it also provides them. The economic forces of farm life help to bind the family together. The farm family must work as a unit. Cooperation and loyalty are the essence of success on a farm. Divorce is rare. Moreover, until recently at least, children were an asset on the farm; in the city they are a liability. A religious philosophy for rural life is centered in the essentials of home and family values. Industry can be measured by the measuring rod of Wall Street, but this is not so with agriculture because the home and the family and the fireside are an integral part of the agricultural enterprise and these do not lend themselves to any such measuring rod.

The second value I have in mind is somewhat difficult to state in a brief sentence. It has to do with the wider distribution of private property. This is a fundamental religious principle and essentially Christian. In this moment of economic chaos when the whole world is in turmoil and confusion on that subject, it is well for us to think about agriculture and rural life as having within them a possible economic balance wheel. The family-owned and operated farm provides within a nation's life the widest distribution of productive property. The farm provides an opportunity for a man to stand upon his own economic feet, self-supporting and self-respecting. Other elements of a valid independence depend upon this one for their foundation. The present day peril in our national life is the trend toward corporation farming and tenancy. But, in spite of this trend, the fact is that out of eight million farms in this country, about four million are owned and operated by the people who live on them. This is the most significant economic fact in our national life. It is the best safeguard I know of against the world wide agitation and all forms of extreme economic radicalism. Every effort should be made in this country to encourage family farm ownership. It is one of the best ways through which to spread the ownership of productive property; it enables a group of people to own and control the tools of their industry. Whenever anyone else, or other groups, own and control the means of a man's livelihood, they own the man.

A third value has to do with the principle of cooperation. I have already referred to this principle as it relates to the farm family. I am now thinking of agriculture and rural life in general. It might seem that on the surface I have been somewhat inconsistent in stressing, on the one hand, the principle of personal ownership and the wide distribution of productive property as a matter of individual as also of social interest and value, and now to stress the need and value of cooperation on the other hand. Personally, I do not think there is anything that is conflicting or inconsistent in these two claims. I see no reason why a man cannot cultivate all those things which go to the making of his highest development as an individual, and, at the same time, achieve this in full cooperation with his neighbors and the community. Cooperation is Christian and cut-throat competition is anti-Christian. I am thinking of this apart from its economic value and thinking of it as a matter of human relations. The farm makes demands upon relationships that industry does not make. Agriculture and rural life have within them certain community qualities that make for cooperative endeavor. While economic cooperation is involved, this can be secured only as the spiritual aspects of cooperation have been recognized and developed. Rural life, in a unique sense, has tremendous possibilities from the point

of view of such spiritual cooperation. "Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ."

It is interesting in this regard to note the actions of recent outstanding Protestant bodies on the matter of the cooperative edict and method. The Oxford Conference this summer went on record as endorsing the cooperatives as the Christian way in economic procedure. The Federal Council of Churches has included a committee to foster and promote the cooperative method in economics. Denmark, Norway and Sweden have given us outstanding examples of the Protestant Church leading out in cooperative development and it is well to note that the major emphasis has been in agriculture and rural life.

The fourth value is that of the land; access to the land and the use of the land as a means of livelihood. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Do we believe this? It is becoming increasingly difficult to do so. But if rural life is to be kept virile; if it is to retain its primary place as the replenishing force in society, this matter of land and its basic value to humanity must be recognized. Until recent years access to the land for agricultural purpose was reasonably easy--perhaps too easy. The trouble is, however, that we have thought of land as a means of selfish profit and not as a matter of stewardship.

Not only possession of the land, but the use of land for agricultural purposes, carries with it significant spiritual as well as social and economic values. Professor Tugwell evidently had this in mind when he made the following statement: "I think it fair to say that intelligent use of the land is the first criterion of any civilization."[1] Dr. O. S. Morgan also has some valuable comments to make upon the subject. "Land is a teacher. Job had come to grips with the facts when he concluded, 'Speak to the earth and it shall teach thee.' We cannot make any attempt to control the land but 'the still, small voice' makes its impression upon us. Land is as patient as a father but as stern as a judge. Discovering the law of the land sets the pattern for discovering the law of God."[2] The proper use of the land, governed by a sense of holy stewardship, will go far toward the solution of the present economic and social disturbances. Substitute the service motive for the grasping, profit motive and land use becomes the healing power for most of our ills. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

A fifth plank in this platform of rural values is that of labor. The dignity of labor needs to be revived. Time was when it had an important place in the religious scheme, but in these modern days it seems to have lost its divine flavor. "Laborare est orare," so runs an old Latin phrase, meaning, to work is to pray.

Well, we have moved a long way from these ideals. We need to restore them, at least so far as rural life is concerned. When we have done all we can to remove drudgery and heavy monotonous toil from rural life, and we should do all we can, life on the farm, and in the rural sections will be accompanied always by wholesome and exacting labor. Life in the country offers relief from the monotony of idleness, from the devastating time-killing, morale-weakening trends of modern industrialism. Working with one's hands in harmony with one's mind and heart provides a Christian discipline that cannot be achieved as well anywhere as it can be in a rural environment and, in particular, upon the farm.

Another religious value that must be kept in mind as a distinct rural contribution is that of the community. Next to the family it represents the most

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1. Tugwell, R. S. "The Battle for Democracy."
2. Morgan, O.S. "What is Land."

significant religious unit in society. This community ideal of which we speak cannot be achieved in the cities; it belongs to the country. It requires a sufficient number of people who know one another, who are able to share with each other the services they can contribute and to build within the area of their common experiences and family life a compact community, a satisfying society. In his valuable little pamphlet on his Philosophy of Rural Life, the dean of rural sociologists, Dr. Charles J. Galpin, makes the following comments on this community factor. "I shall not attempt to limit or define the 'community' to be involved in this planning. Let it be any group of rural people whose active interests are, or are to be, binding them together in thought and action for the future." The community of the future will be rural in spirit and not urban.

If there is anything that is in a peculiar sense Protestant, it is the Bible. I am not suggesting that the Bible is in any way restricted to Protestant use, or that its development is alone the contribution of Protestantism, but I think it safe to say that the more general use of the Bible as a basic text of religion is a reasonable Protestant claim.

Now while the Bible is a book for all people, it has its roots in a rural civilization. It is the story of a rural people in their struggle to find God and in their attempt to develop a religious community. It is interesting to note that in the early history of the Bible rural people had a terrific struggle to maintain their religion in the presence of the cities. Always the city was t devastating influence. Sodom and Gomorrah seem to be a symbol of the city. Even Jesus wept over Jerusalem, and was finally crucified there.

The experience of Jesus is also an interesting comment upon this conflict of the rural wit the city from a religious point of view. He came upon the stage as a native of a simply organized, semi-agricultural nation; located in a semi-tropical region. He spoke to the other natives of this primitive social group as one of them. Not only did He make no attempt to provide a body of teachin applicable to the problems of the more complex communities of His day, but there is no record that He had any comprehension of these problems. In the cleavage within His own small state between the interests of the simple countryman of Galilee and the more sophisticated city dweller of Jerusalem, His sympathies were altogether on the side of the former. Even the comparatively small cities that He knew were to Him monstrous iniquities, obviously marked for destruction. He was appalled at the effect which money-getting and money-keeping have on character. Incomplete as are the records of His life, there is no mistaking the difference between the poise which He showed while in the surroundings of an elementary rural society and the misgivings--and even horrors--which overwhelmed His spirit when He came into contact with the crowding, strident, fighting life of the city, which He ha thought to find holy but which He found accursed.

I am, therefore, insisting that Christianity owes much of its philosophy to this simple, rural environment in which Jesus lived and any religion vitally deriving from Jesus of Nazareth must have regard to these values that are inherent in rural society.

One could continue to enumerate almost indefinitely these values which are primarily inher ent in rural life and which must be revived and sustained if the future is to have any meaning or satisfaction to us. Perhaps they could all be summed up as follows: Ideals worth anything much gr out of common things and daily life and, in particular, in contact with nature. Our main impulses and satisfactions must come out of ourselves and out of the background of our shared community life. We will never solve the problems of living by the multiplying of things. I am opposed to the philos phy which is concerned about rural progress mainly in terms of things and keeping up with the urban Joneses. That sage of American journalism, James Truslow Adams, has stated the case with his usual clarity and erudition in a recent article, "The American Dream." "That the philosophy of life which we have followed in the past few decades does not attain those ends would appear certain. In my opinion the ordinary American man or woman has not been happy. I am far from decrying the making of money or the wish to attain to a rational standard of safety and of genuine comfort, but when the chief end of life becomes the accumulation of money at the maximum speed and the purchase of as many things as possible, there is no time or energy for genuine self-expression, and we eat the apple of dust which Babbitt ate at the end of his efforts." Or, again: "Our constant restlessness in every way is another evidence that our philosophy of getting and spending does not bring content but only wasted lives. To attain to genuine satisfaction with life we must live life in its deeps and not on its surface. A man who finds genuine satisfaction in his daily task, his home or his wife obviously does not want to keep changing them every year and if he does so, it is evidence that satisfaction has not been attained."

If we accept this statement as a criterion of living that is worth while then agriculture and rural life have something to offer. They are in peril and at the point of selling out their rural birthright for a mess of urban pottage. But it is not too late to stem the tide. We may stil "rescue for human society these native values of rural life."